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ABSTRACT

The challenge of building assessment into the curriculum has led the author to closely examine the expected outcomes of her teaching. Her experiences with students participating in projects that involved helping needy people in the community demonstrate the difficulty and advantages of implementing authentic assessment. The middle school students she teaches have collected items for the needy, conducted a cross-cultural study of the community, and planned visits to a retirement home. All of these projects have taught students the importance of teamwork, along with problem-solving skills and consensus decision making skills. Students are also responsible for assisting in the development of evaluation criteria and assessments. Some assessment approaches that have been used are: (1) performance rating scales; (2) video assessment; (3) demonstrations; (4) audio tapes; and (5) written reflections on the activity. Benefits to the students and benefits to the teacher are recognized. (SLD)

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Assessing Growth Through Community Service

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Assessing Growth Through Community Service

The major emphasis of my work in authentic assessment has been in the area of student service through real-world experiences. An attempt to develop appropriate assessment tools for these types of activities, has forced me to focus more clearly on what I do with students. The curriculum I teach incorporates the development of creative problem solving skills, decision making research and leadership skills. Students have a great deal of in-put as to what and how they learn. This particular aspect of my teaching hasn't changed greatly since I have implemented the core practices of Foxfire, for two years. However, the challenge of building assessment into the curriculum has led me to examine closely the expected outcome of my teaching. The overall goal is to help students develop real-life skills that will lead them to become life-long learners.

In the past, my tendency was to plan elaborate units of study that I thought all students would enjoy. I did not solicit input from them. To my dismay, not all students reacted positively to my "wonderful plans." After experiencing a major paradigm shift, I am truly practicing the role of teacher as facilatator and guide. I now realize that I do not always have to impart knowledge but given the right incentives and flexibility, students can construct their own knowledge. It has been thrilling to share learning experiences with my students through which all of us have grown. I have learned to trust students capabilities, judgment and to allow them to try new insights through their mistakes as well as their successes.

As a resource teacher, I have the opportunity to teach sixth, seventh and eighth grade students for twelve week sessions for the three years of middle school. This is a real advantage in getting to know them and how they learn. My classes are small which enables students to participate in a wide variety of activities such as class discussion and problem solving.

Lots of options and student choices are indicative of my class. For example, sixth graders wrote and produced original plays that were performed at an exhibition for parents. Displays of their best work from other classes were also included. During the preparation period, students were video taped as they worked together on scripts, sets, music selection etc. This video was used to assess how well they had worked as a group. The final performance as also taped and evaluated using criteria developed earlier, by the students and myself.

Seventh graders chose to participate in a project entitled "Kids on The Block", a puppet show about various handicaps. Students did research on individual topics that related to the specific disability that their script addressed. They conducted action research by going into the Trainable Mentally Handicapped classes and working one-on-one with the students. The results of this research was presented in a teaching video and shared with other classes. Performances were presented to fourth graders in six elementary schools indicating that their performance had been very successful. The final performances were video taped and assessed. The interaction between the handicapped students and my students has been continued by one eighth grade class.

They plan activities and invite a small number of these students to our class, one day each week. Both groups thoroughly enjoy these sessions. Eight grade students decided to concentrate on community service. In sixth and seventh grade they learned the steps of Creative Problem Solving, did simulations about real problems, and did research concerning important issues. By eight grade, they are anxious to help solve problems by becoming actively involved and making real contributions toward solutions. Each class brainstormed and identified several areas of concern, before making a decision. Two classes are participating in projects involving helping needy people in the local community. They are sponsoring a team-wide effort to collect needed items for the Habitat for Humanity and a sharing center. Students made all the arrangements, organized the project and are being very successful in attaining their goal. A class volunteered at a local sharing center for one day. Each student took this responsibility very seriously. They met people, helped them find clothes, food, toys - whatever they needed. It was a most rewarding experience to observe how these young people from affluent circumstances reacted and provided a real service to real people who were very grateful for their assistance. Reflections written by these students indicate that they learned invaluable lessons that they won't forget. I know of no test that can accurately assess this kind of growth. They are planning another trip to the center to take clothes for teen-agers, since these items were very scarce.

In our continuing effort to build community, both in and out of our classroom, one class is conducting a cross-cultural project on our campus, Through the use of a student generated survey, data is being collected form peers of different ethnic backgrounds. The projected outcome will be a booklet of information concerning the ethnic groups involved in their research. Guest Speakers from the community have been invited to visit our class to share information about their culture. Students will conduct interviews. Plans are being formulated for a cross-cultural day with ethnic food, music, games etc.

A fourth group is planning to visit a retirement home and gather data concerning "changes during a life time". Students are participating in a simulation in class that deals with coping with change in the future. This research will be conducted through one-to-one taped interviews with the retirees. The visit will conclude with a music and dance performance that students have planned and rehearsed.

Through all of the projects mentioned, students have learned the importance of team work. These students have been together for three years and know each other very well. This familiarity is hopefully an asset during group work. They know each other's strengths and weaknesses and emphasis is placed on the importance of each one using their strength to accomplish tasks. Having been taught creative problem solving skills and consensus decision making skills, they are able to implement skills, as they work in groups.

As class begins, it is interesting to watch students rearrange tables to best accommodate their activities of the day. This is a habit they have initiated on their own and they know that I'm flexible enough to allow them the freedom.

Students are responsible for assisting in the development of criteria and assessment tools. This is not an easy task at the middle school level since they do not always clearly understand what should be assessed. By working through this process other, teacher and students have gained new insights into what they know, how they think and what they consider to be important in the final outcome. The decision as to the form of assessment to be used is largely up to them. Some examples we have utilized are: rating scales for a performance, video assessment, demonstrations, audio tapes, reflections etc. Rating scales are also completed to measure growth in group dynamics. This experience enables growth in receiving and giving constructive criticism which leads to further maturity.

The experiences I have discussed have placed students in actual challenges in which they have identified problems and worked together to find solutions. Hopefully, these skills will be of use to them in future learning. We have begun to focus on specific behaviors or habits that demonstrate growth; for example, changed attitudes, more confidence in real-world situations, greater maturity in interacting with people of all ages and circumstances. They have greatly improved in their ability to assess their own progress through written reflections.

As I reflect on my own progress I realize that participation in the Four Seasons project has been a stimulus for my individual growth, both personally and professionally. As I have implemented authentic assessment in my classes, I have been forced to examine my beliefs about the teaching/learning process, my own teaching style and the individual needs of students. It was extremely exciting to be at Brown University last summer with fellow educators who are instrumental in bringing about school reform.

During the past year, I have had many opportunities to share what I've learned with team members, colleagues, administrators, parents and students. These sharing experiences have forced me to focus on what I do and why I do it. The questions keep increasing - the answers are not always clear. My efforts to make learning more meaningful is an on-going struggle and I realize that this is indeed a growing time for me. As I gain a better appreciation of what it means to be a life-long learner, I am seriously considering pursing a Doctoral degree next year.